

Active Bystander Intervention and De-Escalation

De-Escalation and Intervention Strategies

Bystander intervention (ABI) refers here to when you are a third party to someone else being harassed, abused, or harmed.

Interpersonal de-escalation (DE) refers here to when you are being harassed, abused, or harmed.

Interpersonal De-Escalation: Goals

- **Re-humanize** the parties involved
- **Defuse** the situation by shifting the energy
- **Create space** for potential conflict transformation (justice/sustainable peace)

Bystander Intervention: Goals

- **Re-humanize** the parties involved, particularly the person being harassed
- **Defuse** the situation by shifting the energy
- **Unleash the constructive power** of the person being harassed

Bystander Strategy: *focus first on person being harassed*

You might wait to intervene if the conflict seems constructive, healthy, the person being harassed seems to be doing something positive or asks you not to help.

You might choose to intervene if the conflict seems quite destructive and unhealthy; the person being harassed seems quite afraid or anxious; physical posturing is intensifying or physical harm is occurring.

General Tactics

1. **Center:** be calm and focused; ex. utilize a deep breath, mantra, an image, a memory

Things to Do:

2. **Humanity:** see other as a person, with dignity
3. **Presence, Posture, Eye Contact:** stand or sit nearby (ABI), be confident
4. **Empathetic Listening:** for feelings, needs behind the expressed positions

Things to Say:

5. **Dialogue:** check in with the person being harassed- “Is everything ok? Do you need anything?” (ABI); engage an aggressor with **CLARA** and/or **Nonviolent Communication** (see boxes below)
6. **Dignity Phrases:** to the aggressor about person being harassed, ex.’s “she is human, she has a mother; she has children; she cares about others; to the aggressor about the aggressor, ex.’s you are valuable, your ideas matter, I care for you, you are better than that, you are smarter, you are more creative.”
7. **Ask Questions / Give Options:** ex.’s “What do you need? Are there other options here? Will you put the weapon down? May I have the weapon? Will you work with me? I will listen to what you have to say, if you can take a deep breath. We can talk through this, if you lay down the weapon”.
8. **Interconnectedness / Solidarity:** ex.’s “We can meet everyone’s needs here. Let’s slow down. Let’s do this together. We are one family. Let’s break this cycle of violence. We can find a way out.” Share suffering/struggles: ex.’s “I have been afraid before also. I have been really angry before also. I have had a hard time with relationships. I have messed up before.”
9. **Distraction / Humor:** use surprising verbal or non-verbal actions; ex. ‘nice shirt,’ ‘where did you get those shoes?’ ask for directions or the time, play music, sing, drum, dance

Things to Do:

10. **Delegate:** ask for others to help or identify more credible messengers
11. **Peel Away Enablers:** identify and try to get the attention of an enabler who is with the primary aggressor in order to minimize their enabling of the aggressor
12. **Distance:** create distance between the parties or others nearby who are at risk
13. **Delay:** Stay to check on the person being harassed after the incident (ABI)
14. **Interposition:** ways to utilize our body, ex.’s could include standing closer, one hand out and one hand up, both hands up slowly moving down/up, standing or sitting in between, lay on ground as buffer, hold hand/arms, block, pull someone off another; slowly walking back the aggressor as an individual or by forming a V/U shape, or circle with an opening; encircle the person being harassed and perhaps walk them out of danger; form a wall/link arms; avoid punching or dehumanization.

CLARA

Calm and Center Yourself: Check in with yourself, appear calm, centered, and self-assured even if you don't feel it. Avoid pointing, crossing your arms, or other more aggressive postures.

Listen: Let the person vent and be sure to listen explicitly for feelings, needs, or values.

Acknowledge: Begin by acknowledging the feelings, needs, or values you have heard. [Not about agreeing with their position, statement, or behavior.] ex. "I sense your aggravation at this situation. I hear your concern for safety."

Respond: After acknowledgment, if there is a further threat of harassment or violence, offer open-ended or choice questions; address the issue; make a clear request or proposal. ex. "Will you tell me more about your concerns? "I understand you have every right to feel angry but it is not ok to threaten people here."

Assess: Trust your instincts: If de-escalation is not working, STOP & GET HELP.

Non-Violent Communication

Center

Observations: Try to think in terms of or make statements that are more observations than evaluations.

Feelings: Try to identify your own and the other's feelings in your awareness or verbally.

Needs: Try to identify your own and the other's needs in your awareness or verbally.

Requests: Offer requests or proposals that are specific, positive actions, and flexible to try and meet some of the needs at stake in the conflict.

Resources

- Introduction to Non-Violent Communications: [Yoram](#) (12 min.); [Maria](#) (11); [Roxy](#) (30)
- [How to use Non-Violent Communication](#)
- [Feelings](#) and [Feelings Wheel](#)
- [Human Needs Chart](#) for Non-Violent Communication
- [Requests that help us meet needs](#) for Non-Violent Communication
- [CLARA Method](#)
- [Shanti Sena Network](#)
- [UCP/A Community of Practice](#)

Scenario 1

During a public meeting of the election board, there are various groups gathering before the meeting starts. One larger man aggressively approaches a group wearing Fair Fight Action shirts. He starts saying things like, "yeah, you bet we are going to fight for the truth. We are going to Stop the Steal! A fair election would have Trump in office. You better back down or there will be a price to pay." If you were a volunteer nearby, how might you de-escalate this situation?

Center: check in with yourself, are you calm and focused?

Listen: what feelings, experiences, needs did you hear? *Feelings:* frustrated, aggravated, anger; *Needs:* transparency, reliability, participation, being seen and heard

Acknowledge: “I hear you. I sense your frustration and anger. I hear your concern for the truth and a reliable, transparent election process.”

Respond: “Will you tell me more about your concerns? What steps would you recommend?” or “I wonder how they feel with you so close to them and speaking loudly? I wonder if this person is also feeling some desire for a transparent, reliable election process?” or “I can’t understand you when you’re shouting and I’d like to hear what you’re saying. Will you stand over here with me so I can hear you better?”

*Other tactics above might also be helpful. Be ready to adjust tactics, i.e. distraction, delegate, etc.

Scenario 2

During a public meeting of the election board, one person is sharing their views at the open mic. They are talking about education. Another woman suddenly stands up about 5 feet away and starts yelling at the speaker saying things like, “you are ridiculous. We need to learn about the greatness of America and stop trashing it. How will our kids grow up with any hope and purpose? This bullshit critical race theory is from the devil and has no business in our schools.” She keeps going. If you were a volunteer nearby, how might you de-escalate this situation?

Center: check in with yourself, are you calm and focused?

Listen: what feelings, experiences, needs did you hear? *Feelings:* irritated, frustrated, disheartened; *Needs:* acknowledgment, hope, purpose

Acknowledge: “I hear you. I sense your irritation. I hear your concern for acknowledging the good aspects of our country and for stirring hope or purpose in our children.”

Respond: “I can’t understand you when you’re shouting and I’d like to hear what you’re saying. Will you stand over here with me so I can hear you better?” or “Would you be willing to take a breath with me and stand in line for the mic?” or “I wonder how they feel with you shouting while they are speaking? I wonder if this person is also hoping for some acknowledgment about our reality and deeper purpose for our future?” or “We can find what’s healthy for all of us if we listen to each other and work together.”

*Other tactics above might also be helpful. Be ready to adjust tactics, i.e. distraction, delegate, etc.



Contact us to learn more about online or in-person training opportunities:

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